United Nations E/CN.6/2019/NGO/60

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
27 November 2018
English
Original: Spanish

Commission on the Status of Women
Sixty-third session
11–22 March 2019
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by Federación Internacional de Fe y Alegría and Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

18-20393 (E) 181218 191218

Please recycle

Statement

Millions of girls and young women, especially those who are poor, migrants or refugees, have disabilities or belong to an ethnic minority, are subjected to multiple forms of discrimination and physical and emotional violence. Education is key to ending this scourge, but it is not the only solution. The reality of inequality and violence against girls must be urgently addressed in a holistic manner.

Sexual or labour exploitation, genital mutilation and early marriage at a very young age are different types of violence that have a serious impact on the independence, self-esteem and health of girls. This form of injustice is one of the most persistent, systematic and widespread human rights violations. Violence against girls is rooted in the gender inequalities present in all social structures and its existence is a consequence of the discrimination they face.

Two factors come together to make girls vulnerable to violence: their gender (the fact of being female) and age (their stage of development as children or adolescents). These factors conditions and the harmful practices associated with them involve a risk of violence in a multitude of socioeconomic and cultural contexts.

The Federación Internacional Fe y Alegría and the Jesuit Refugee Service work with vulnerable populations in 41 countries around the world in the field of education as a human right and as the main tool for change. Through our work we support thousands of girls and young women who are victims of widespread violence just because they are female, meaning their rights are violated, their lives destroyed, their communities broken and their development halted.

Every day we see how certain discriminatory norms and the traditional and cultural practices of the communities and families with which we work give rise to inequality between girls and boys from the time of birth and lead to the abuse of girls. Traditional toxic roles that are replicated and that reproduce patriarchal environments and social patterns of conduct cause women and men to accept and develop attitudes and violent forms of behaviour as though they were natural.

We condemn the lack of institutional capacity to address this reality and we condemn the lack of mechanisms for reporting abuse and violence and protecting girls from them. Despite the existence of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the fact that many countries have adopted legislation that, to varying degrees, protects children, the existence of a policy or legal framework does not necessarily equate to its implementation because there is not always the will or the means to enforce existing regulation. Furthermore, in most cases, girls and young women are unaware of their rights, are afraid of being stigmatized or are unsure of how to report cases of violence.

We sound the alarm at the increase in the number of girls and young women who have been forced to leave their homes fleeing conflict, violent extremism, natural disasters or humanitarian or other emergencies. The reality of forced displacement and a refugee existence makes them even more vulnerable, including to trafficking, exploitation and recruitment by armed groups.

Violence triggers a cycle of disadvantage for girls, affecting their current state of health and psychological and emotional well-being and the future development of their personality and abilities. Abuse, mistreatment and early pregnancy directly affect girls' education, by reducing their school attendance, participation and performance. Child marriage can be both a cause and a consequence of dropping out of school.

The Commission on the Status of Women has recognized and repeatedly and strongly condemned all forms of gender-based violence against the most vulnerable girls that persist around the world because they constitute barriers to the full achievement of gender equality and the genuine exercise of their fundamental rights and freedoms, as well as the development of their full potential on an equal basis with boys and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

However, despite international commitments and the more than 25 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, real progress in the protection of girls and young women is inadequate and too slow. Girls are still invisible in international treaties and they are not recognized as having the right to special protection against gender-based violence, forced marriage or genital mutilation.

As educational organizations, Fe y Alegría and the Jesuit Refugee Service reiterate that the exercise of the right to quality, inclusive and equitable education is an essential element that contributes to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of girls, human rights, sustainable development and the eradication of poverty.

The most effective way to combat violence against girls is to change the social structures, attitudes and norms that underpin it. Only then will we be able to end acceptance of the abuse of girls, by transforming the current power relationship between men and women, boys and girls, into one of respect based on the recognition of equality and freedom of every human being.

Traditional gender roles that follow violent patterns are learned in the process of socialization and are transmitted from generation to generation. Schools, the main institution where socialization takes place, can reproduce and perpetuate this discrimination. Therefore, schools must be made into safe spaces for girls, where patterns of violence cannot take root in individuals.

Fe y Alegría and the Jesuit Refugee Service call for States, civil society and other actors concerned by the status of girls and young women to join efforts to transform schools into safe and protective spaces, for which there must be inclusive school infrastructure appropriate to the specific needs of girls and young women. It is also necessary, within the school community, to promote reflection, awareness and a critical review of the unequal gender norms that fuel violence. Schools must establish programmes to prevent, detect and respond to any instances of violence. Teaching staff must be trained in gender equality and in the prevention and detection of violence against girls.

In all areas, including school, we must work to adopt, review and guarantee the accelerated and effective implementation of laws that criminalize violence against women and girls, as well as comprehensive, multidisciplinary and gender-responsive preventive, protective and prosecutorial measures and services to eliminate and prevent all forms of violence against girls in public and private spaces, as well as the harmful practices that affect the well-being and development of girls.

In parallel with this process, there is an urgent need to promote protection mechanisms, together with families and the educational community as a whole, as well as with other actors outside schools. In order to achieve the transition to an egalitarian model of society, individuals, organizations, schools and communities have an urgent duty to break the silence surrounding violence against girls and to ensure that girls have access to justice, as well as to develop, disseminate and learn about ways to protect and restore their rights.

It is also important to encourage the strengthening of institutions and the culture of democracy, thereby ensuring compliance with the law and ending impunity and the acceptance of violence.

We are concerned by the urgency of the situation. Although education is a precondition and essential requirement, it cannot by itself achieve a more egalitarian world in which all girls and young women can live in safety and dignity. That is why the reality of inequality and violence against girls must be addressed in a holistic manner. In that regard, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a framework to ensure that the rights of girls are protected and promoted. We must give priority to ensuring that girls have a life free of all kinds of violence, and this means that States must meet their commitments and urgently take the necessary measures to ensure equality and the right to education for all girls and to eradicate all forms of violence against them.